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SUBJECT: INTERVIEW OF BELGIAN DEFENSE MINISTER PIETER DE CREM
DEFENDING BELGIUM'S INVOLVEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

1. Embassy wishes to provide Department with the text of the following interview of Belgian Defense Minister Pieter De Crem, which appeared in the Dutch-language Belgian magazine, Humo, on July 14, 2009.

2. Begin text of interview:

Q: As Defense Minister, you let our country fight along in the American 'war on terror' in Afghanistan. Off the record, military experts and diplomats say that that war is a lost cause: "Not one inch of progress has been booked."

Minister De Crem: I absolutely do not agree. Each time I go there, I see a lot of progress. By the way, there is no war there. War is when one country or a couple of countries take up arms against another country or regime. In Afghanistan, over forty countries cooperate to help the regime of President Karzai; build up a state structure, build roads, build schools, develop an economy. Is that making war?"

The safety of the planet is for a large part dependent upon what happens in that part of the world. We have the great luck that London, Paris and Madrid are not in Belgium. Go ask there how it feels to be a victim of international terrorism that is sponsored from Afghanistan. Our commitment is not the choice of Pieter De Crem either, but of the whole government. And what we are doing now is the absolute minimum. At the end of this year, we will maybe have six hundred people in the field there.

Q: Do you want to send more troops to Afghanistan?

Minister De Crem: The core mission of the Belgian army is: execute military operations abroad. Full stop. And that is not a decision by De Crem either: that has been written in the government agreement. The Danes and the Dutch have over one thousand men in the field there.

Public opinion had been rocked to sleep about our army by the purple government coalition (Note: that coalition is so-called because Liberals, whose signature color is blue, and Socialists (red) formed the purple government coalition between 1999 and 2007 with Guy Verhofstadt as Prime Minister.) The army is not some kind of civic protection who comes to distribute little bags with drinking water when a water pipe has burst somewhere. That can at the most be an additional task from time to time. The army is not an ennobled humanitarian agency. If that becomes the principal mission, we would better wrap up our army altogether, and transfer the 10 percent of the budget that the army is devouring now to development aid.

Some people apparently forget that Belgium has signed a couple of international treaties that do entail some obligations: the NATO treaty, the UN charter, EU treaties, etc. Playing the smartest boy

at school about how world problems should be taken on: that is something for party conventions and op-eds. The time to play is over.

Q: The independent American think tank Rand Corporation has studied the way in which hundreds of terror actions have been countered over the last forty years. In only 7% (of the cases) has military action been successful. Still you are - literally - throwing yourself at it with Belgian troops?"

Minister De Crem: I can hit you with some other figures. Now 80 percent of Afghans have access to healthcare; under the Taliban that number was 8 percent. Child mortality has decreased by 25 percent. The GDP has doubled. Four million refugees are no longer shot in other words.

Just like my foreign colleagues, I have told President Karzai often times that he needs to intervene in a resolute way if he wants that the international community stays in his country. We are not there for our pleasure, hey. All Defense Ministers will receive more applause at home when they withdraw troops instead of sending more of them. Do you really think that I am waking up in the morning with the idea: we are going to throw ourselves at it?

Q: Still, according to Rand Corporation, involving terrorist groups in the political process is the best strategy. Are you prepared to negotiate with the Taliban?"

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Minister De Crem: "During our last visit to President Karzai, I touched upon that. In 2004, the Taliban were not invited to the Loya Jirga. Why not abandon that strategy? Why do we not involve moderate Taliban in the process? They are not all bomb throwers, rapists or narco-traffickers, are they? Do you know what the answer was? "Moderate Taliban do not exist."

Q: The specialized magazine Jane's Defence Weekly estimates that it will take another five years before the Afghan army can take over control from the international troop force. Will the Belgian troops stay for another five years too?

Minister De Crem: We are handing over quite some tasks to the Afghan army already as we speak, and we have a mandate from the government to stay until the end of 2010 in Kandahar, Kunduz and Kabul. What happens after depends upon what the international community asks us. The government decides. I don't command and I don't forbid either. Some countries are already announcing now that they will withdraw troops, but creating stability in the region is a mission for the long haul. Just imagine that the regime in the neighboring country, Pakistan, falls and that the Taliban seize power there. Then we have a nuclear power governed by Islamists! I am curious which scenario think tanks will develop if that situation becomes real."

Q: Maybe our boys will come home earlier as soon as the first body bags come in at (the military airport of) Melsbroek?"

Minister De Crem: That is easy talk. Afghanistan is one giant risk area: in that case, you know that serious incidents are not unthinkable. That reflection has also been made by the government, and that is why we have sent well-equipped and solidly trained military. But you can never exclude that people will get killed.

By the way, I think that the discussion on that topic is held in an improper way. This morning I read in the newspaper about the enormous increase of the number of deadly victims amongst motorcyclists on our roads, and recently I also saw frightening stats on the number of drugs victims in Belgium. For the rest I am not making any comparisons at all.

Q: "What affects you most: a fallen Belgian paratrooper or a dead Afghan civilian?"

Minister De Crem: When I said aloud, during the 2007 electoral campaign (Note: at the time, De Crem was still in the opposition, and the francophone socialist Andr Flahaut was Belgian Defense Minister), that our army needed to take on more international and

risky missions, newspapers filled up with incensed reactions, including from then Prime Minister Verhofstadt. But last year, eight hundred Afghan civilian victims fell in Afghanistan: 75 percent of them was killed by the Taliban. They just kill their own people! Our F-16s sometimes need to intervene to protect the life of NATO military: during that kind of action, you cannot always avoid civilian casualties. It is a moral dilemma, because each victim is one victim too many.

Q: How do you solve that dilemma?

Minister De Crem: "I have the fullest confidence in our military. If they execute their mission correctly, I will always defend them, no matter how bad the consequences are. Always!"

End Text of Interview

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